

# VU Research Portal

## Stabbing to get to prison

van Gemert, F.H.M.

**published in**  
Criminological Encounters  
2018

**DOI (link to publisher)**  
[10.26395/CE18010106](https://doi.org/10.26395/CE18010106)

**document version**  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

**citation for published version (APA)**  
van Gemert, F. H. M. (2018). Stabbing to get to prison: Biography as an encounter with the criminal mind. *Criminological Encounters*, 1(1), 57-67. <https://doi.org/10.26395/CE18010106>

### General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal ?

### Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

**E-mail address:**  
[vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl](mailto:vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl)



## Stabbing to Get to Prison: Biography as an Encounter with the Criminal Mind

Frank VAN GEMERT\*

\* VU University Amsterdam, the Netherlands; f.h.m.van.gemert@vu.nl

### ABSTRACT

Stabbing someone because of a minor altercation and then turning yourself in, knowing that you will be convicted of a serious crime, doesn't seem to make sense. One needs to know the perpetrator and the life he lived in order to understand the why and how of this offence. Doing research for writing an authorized biography enables such deep immersion, because of the quality of data gathered on the single person. While it is common in criminology, as well as for writing a biography, to use an approach with a focus on structure and stress context and background factors, in this study an interaction perspective is added to include what happens in the foreground. "An encounter with the criminal mind" can be understood as a personal meeting with a protagonist who commits crimes, but it can also refer to a close look at the criminal act and bring to the surface what the protagonist was thinking and feeling at that time.

### KEYWORDS

biography, structure and interaction

## 1 Introduction

Utrecht, the Netherlands, August 28, 2010. On his 54<sup>th</sup> birthday, Jan Hoolwerf visits a man he knows from the neighbourhood. He called in advance, and prior to leaving his home he packs a bag with some clothes and on top he puts a big knife that he bought a few days earlier. Then Jan walks over to the man's apartment and is let in. The two have a chat, drink coffee and then Jan takes the knife from his bag, stands up, and takes a few steps in the direction of the surprised man. He stabs the man, and as they struggle, the man is hit seven times in his head, chest, belly, and right hand. As the man starts to shout, Jan leaves the house and walks over to the nearby police station to turn himself in. The victim survives the attack. Jan is convicted of attempted murder and sent to prison for five years, followed by an indefinite period of entrustment in a mental hospital.

A year earlier, I interviewed Jan for the first time. I had heard about this man who had been incarcerated in the US and had become a member of the Sureños, an infamous Latino prison gang. As a gang researcher, I was keen to hear more about this first-hand. I tried to get in contact with him and as I had heard he gave lectures, this turned out to be very easy. The foundation he worked for gave me his phone number, I called him and two days later we met at my university office. On that occasion, I heard parts of Jan's intriguing life history. He had allowed me to record the conversation and I was thrilled by the idea of digging deeper. A few days later, I sent him an email and suggested that we work as a team in putting his life history on paper. Jan replied within the hour: "When do we start?"

The last interview took place on August 17, 2010. I was going to start writing the biography and we agreed that, if questions arose, we would be in contact again. A little more than a week later, he committed the capital offence. It was premeditated. In court, Jan described how he had planned the whole thing and the judge convicted him of attempted murder. I finished writing the biography and in November 2011 it was published

(Van Gemert, 2011). Of course, this last violent act had to be included in the book. I was shocked and appalled when it happened but at the same time it raised questions. Jan had turned to violence before and we spoke about it at length, but once more, I realized I had had a close encounter with a person criminologists normally study from a distance. How could I ever understand what went on inside his criminal mind?

A biography is a case study based on just one person, an approach that is seldom used in current criminology. The vast majority of researchers in this discipline prefer to study a (much) larger number of people but there are still good reasons for including the biography in the criminological toolkit. In a special issue of *Theoretical Criminology*, dedicated to the famous study *The Jack-Roller* by Clifford Shaw (1930), the editors state that little is known about “what goes on inside the criminal mind” (Maruna & Matravers, 2007, p. 430). Quantitative studies use a deductive frame and zoom in on specific elements to be tested while the individual of flesh and blood is replaced by a “sort of ‘stick figure’ of the over-socialized individual or rational actor” (ibid., p. 430). This article discusses writing a biography as an opportunity for criminologists to encounter the criminal mind, and the case of Jan Hoolwerf will serve as an example.

When it comes to biography, it is evident that structure and history help to explain the relation between micro and macro. In *The Sociological Imagination*, Mills argues: “The individual can understand his own experience and gauge his own fate only by locating himself within his period” (Mills, 1959, p. 12). This applies to the individual but it is equally true for the sociologist. Likewise, in traditional criminology, background variables are important determinants of crime. Family (Bowlby, 1951), neighbourhood (Shaw & McKay, 1931), and/or class (Merton, 1957) have often been used to explain a person’s criminal behavior. Furthermore, biographies of criminals yield important case material for life course criminologists looking for turning points, life events, or various intergenerational phenomena (Farrington, 2003; Laub & Sampson, 2003). Biographers use the contexts of time and place, which provide both general and unique elements to help us understand what chances and obstacles the protagonist has come across in his life (Shanahan & Macmillan, 2008).

In this contribution, however, an element is added. Explaining the actions of the protagonist or understanding his motives is not only done by considering the wider context and background elements. On top of that, the here and now of crime, its foreground, is brought to the fore. This means the criminal event draws attention, and of course one would choose the protagonist to be the main source to supply the data. This is referred to as “instant ethnography” (Ferrell, 2009). As a consequence, an “encounter with the criminal mind” can be understood as a personal meeting with an individual who commits crimes, but it can also refer to a close look at the criminal act and bring to the surface what he was thinking and was feeling at that time.

Such encounters are rare and, certainly, not all biographies include one. The benefits of this approach depend on specific data that can only be gathered in collaboration with the protagonist. The next section sets out the variety of biographies in the field of criminology, in order to find out what category applies. The paragraphs that follow discuss the theoretical perspectives and methods that were used in the research for Jan’s biography, and the concept of “pose” is introduced. Subsequently, the life history of Jan Hoolwerf is described, and it stops at his last attempted murder. Finally, this last violent act will be unravelled as it presents an encounter with the criminal mind.

## 2 Biography Categories

Biographies have never been part of mainstream criminology. A relationship with life course criminology seems obvious, but the focus on a singular case ( $N = 1$ ) makes it difficult to generalize findings. As previously mentioned, nowadays, most academics choose other approaches but this preference is not self-evident.

Because of their interest in the ethnography of urban street life, Chicago School sociologists have produced a number of biographies. Through the life history of the protagonist, one learns about the world he lives in and his criminal profession. It is no coincidence, that these publications refer to these professions: *The Hobo* (Anderson, 1923), *The Jack-Roller* (Shaw, 1930), and *The Professional Thief* (Sutherland, 1937). Later, *The Professional Fence* (Klockars, 1974) was added to the list.

More recently, the public attention given to other specific professional groups gave rise to the publication of biographies on other professions. Following gang wars, especially in Los Angeles, a number of biographies on gang members were published: *Always Running* (Rodriguez, 1993), *Monster* (Shakur, 1993), and *Inside the Crips* (Simpson & Pearlman, 2005). After they were caught, Antonio Calderone (Arlacchi, 1993), Sammy “the Bull” Gravano (Maas, 1999), and Giusy Vitale (Vitale & Costanzo, 2009) collaborated as *pentiti* with the justice system and brought new insight into the closed world of the mafia. Next, fuelled by the financial crisis, white-

collar criminals such as Nick Leeson (Leeson, 1996) and Bernard Madoff (Arvedlund, 2010; LeBor, 2009) became the focus of attention.

Cruel violence triggers the media. So when a serial killer is arrested, often a true crime biography follows. Such was the case with Ted Bundy (Rule, 1980), Jerry Brudos (Rule, 1983), Dennis Nilsen (Masters, 1985), John Wayne Gacy (Sullivan & Maiken, 1984), Henry Lee Lucas (Norris, 1991), Aileen Wuornos (Wuornos & Berry-Dee, 2006), and others. The same is true for cruel and extraordinary cases where children are involved. In Austria, Joseph Fritzl held his daughter Elisabeth in a secluded basement for 24 years. She gave birth to seven of his children in that basement (Hall, 2008). Marc Dutroux kidnapped, raped, and murdered six girls in Belgium (Coninck, 2004; Leurs, 2006). The protagonist of books like these can also be the victim, illustrated by the case of Natascha Kampusch, who was kidnapped and held in captivity for eight years (Kampusch, 2010). Margaux Frago (2011) and Ted van Lieshout (2012) wrote autobiographical life histories, both describing a paedosexual relationship with a much older man.

Many of the more recent books were published because of their commercial capacity. Crime sells and there is no denying the commodification of crime. The old Chicago School studies had different incentives. While the city was the stomping ground of gangsters like Al Capone, these researchers did not pick up the cases that made the headlines. Instead, they studied the more regular petty criminals that had not been in the focus of academic attention and about which there was still much to learn. Apart from commercial gains, there are other motives for writing a biography.

Looking at how and why biographies are produced makes it possible to categorize them. An important first category consists of autobiographies, often written by criminals who are incarcerated. American examples are Caryl Chessman (1954) and Jack Abbott (1981), whereas from the UK there are autobiographies by John McVicar (1974), Jimmy Boyle (1977), Walter Probyn (1977), and more recently by “Razor” Smith (2004). Among the motives to write these *prison biographies* is the author’s urge to attest to a humiliating and unjust prison system, to reopen his criminal case, and to escape the death penalty.

Criminals who roam freely or ex-criminals also write autobiographies; sometimes they collaborate with a team of ghostwriters. They may try to make some money but at the same time they look back and want to set things straight. These writings can be testimonies or diaries. Sometimes authors want to come clean and display remorse. More often, though, autobiographies have a resolute tone of perseverance. Examples can be found in the extensive bibliography on the British Kray twins and their siblings (R. & R. Kray, 1988; C. Kray, 1988; R. Kray, 1990; R. Kray, 1993; K. Kray, 2000; R. Kray, 2000), or in the first book of the hardened Australian “Chopper” Read (1991).

A second category is the authorized biography. The protagonist and the author work together to produce the life history. The Chicago School examples (Anderson, 1923; Shaw, 1930; Sutherland, 1937) belong to this category, as does *Confessions From a Dying Thief*, a study by Steffensmeier and Ulmer (2005) and three biographies from Dutch criminologists. Bovenkerk (1995) interviewed Bettien Martens, a Dutch go-between in Colombian and Italian drug networks, and Hagar Peeters (2002) studied the life of *Gerrit de Stotteraar*, an inveterate burglar with a very long criminal record. The last one is Jan Hoolwerf’s biography (Van Gemert, 2011).

In the third category of unauthorized biographies, the author is often a journalist, whose job it is to follow specific “hot” cases by doing desk research, talking to the police, and writing reports when cases come to court. In the end, the offender is sentenced and goes to prison, or his career may end because he is assassinated. That is the moment when the journalist wraps up his material and writes a book. Dutch examples are the books on Klaas Bruinsma (Middelburg, 1992), Charles Zwolsman (Hüsken, 2001), Mink Kok (Hüsken, 2007), Thea Moear (Kortering, 2008), and Willem Holleeder (Kok, 2011).

The three categories make a large collection of biographies with many possible varieties. There neither is a standard for the literary quality of these books, nor is a designated form for describing and analyzing the protagonist’s life history. Obviously, this makes it difficult to discuss biographies in general terms and point out strengths and limitations, but the question of the relevance for criminology remains.

In *The Jack-Roller*, Shaw (1930) stresses the fact that the book contains “the boy’s own story”. This is where we see the Chicago School influence of urban ethnography. Shover (2010) acknowledges the relevance of the emic perspective, as he suggests, examining life histories as ethnographic data: “Documents or productions written or in other ways recorded and made available to others that consist largely or entirely of a first-person narrative about all or much of the subject’s life” (Shover, 2010, p. 14). After reading an estimated number of 200 of these texts, Shover comes to some interesting conclusions. For example, while policymakers like to claim there is a deterrent effect from increasing penalties, biographies provide little evidence of this. Quite the

opposite seems to be true, as Shover points to the spiteful or angry words of protagonists that attest to the hardening effects of undergoing punishment.

As the books in the third category are written without the help and consent of the protagonist, they are different from first-person narratives. It is the author who decides on what is written, and this can result in the protagonist being discontent. Journalists say they don't want the collaboration, because this means they have to reach agreements all the time, taking away their freedom to write what they think is the truth (Middelburg, 1992, pp. 94–5; Van der Zee, 2006, pp. 293–5; see also Van Gemert, 2011, pp. 43–6; 2012b, pp. 23–4). Certainly, there is some logic to this, especially if the key person has cases pending and would benefit from certain things being written yes or no. On the other hand, the protagonist is, of course, the most important source of information and this is an important reason to include in data collection what the number one expert has to say. However, many journalists write unauthorized biographies.

Journalists are often interested in notorious criminals that are on the run, or whose case comes to court. These are suspects that have not yet been found guilty. A lot of journalistic effort goes into checking facts and looking into links that may point to guilt or innocence. Whodunnit? There is no denying the legal relevance of this question, but for social scientists it is certainly not the only one or even the most important one to be raised. Most biographers find this focus much too narrow because a biography is not only about facts. What the protagonist does, his activities, can be described, but what he thinks and how he sees things is hard or maybe even impossible to register without his cooperation. An unauthorized biography can tell a story *about* the protagonist but it is not an emic approach and the result is not *his* story. Collaboration is crucial if one is inclined to present that perspective.

### 3 Collaborating with the Protagonist

First-person narratives, being the first two of the above categories, are generally the most valuable for criminological analysis of what goes on in the criminal mind. Shover (2010) suggests these life histories should be used as *sources* for data. Apart from that, biography can be the *product* of research (Van Gemert, 2016). This means not just using data available in life histories but retrieving new data and writing a biography as the outcome of criminological research based on collaboration with the protagonist. Three aspects linked to this kind of research need some elaboration.

Firstly, can a relationship be established? Apart from the book on Jan Hoolwerf, I have written a second biography on Said Bensellam, a kickboxer and bouncer of Moroccan descent, who became a very successful youth worker (Van Gemert, 2015b). Before writing the book on Said, I was in contact with three other potential protagonists, all male, with various criminal careers but none of this resulted in a collaboration. I met with two of them; the third was incarcerated but he would soon be released from prison. Two men lost interest when I made it clear that our work would, most likely, not be very profitable, while the third decided that he would prefer to take on the task of writing the book himself. Intense teamwork on personal matters for a longer period is not self-evident (Van Gemert, 2013).

Secondly, what is a good approach for interviewing? In retrieving a life history, the interviewer can impose an outside order that doesn't correspond with the stories of the protagonist. How to start? What elicitation to use? Chronology is a simple and logical option. Make a timeline and start at the beginning (see below). Another option is to follow the protagonist and focus on what he thinks is important. Denzin (1989) suggests specifically asking the respondent for "epiphanies", important moments in his life. Similarly, the FANI (free association narrative interview) method uses open questions to encourage respondents to remember specific events that bare emotional meanings (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). During the research on the book about Said Bensellam, I learned that plans made in advance do not always work. I hoped to use chronology but when Said and I sat down for our weekly sessions, he would be so caught up in his daily struggles that this was what he mainly talked about. Most of it was very relevant, but to me, at first, it was chaos. What evolved did not match the structured research design I had in mind beforehand, and analyzing the transcripts was a complex task, but in the end, it offered me splendid insight into what he does and what goes on in his mind.

Thirdly, how to go back in time? In criminology, it is normal procedure to interview imprisoned respondents on what they did in the past. This can add to rationalizing and/or neutralizing, because what the researcher generally finds out is what the respondent says when looking back (Copes & Hochstedler, 2010). Over time, things are forgotten and new experience overwrites old meaning. It can be interesting to know what people now think and feel, but when the goal is to get closer to the criminal mind, the researcher is more interested in thoughts and emotions at the time of the crime. In a conversation, the difference may at first seem irrelevant to the respondent and he may not feel the urge to go back in time. It can be uncomfortable or even painful, but it



is inevitable when writing this kind of biography. For the researcher, it is important to be explicit and help the respondent make the distinction. “This is what you think now. Let’s go back; what exactly happened at that time?”

#### 4 Foreground

Apart from the structure perspective mentioned in the Introduction, which focuses on background variables, in a biography, one can also apply an interaction perspective. In his book *Seductions of Crime*, Katz (1988) tries to delicately unravel offences by looking at the here and now of crime. His focus is on the foreground.

Just like a portrait or sculpture, a biography can be seen as an image of a person made by an artist or a writer. The person is portrayed in a certain pose that is recognized by the audience. “Le penseur”, the famous sculpture of Auguste Rodin, is an image of a man plunged in thought. Rodin probably saw his model take on this pose, studied it, and created the sculpture. Likewise, a biographer writes about the protagonist and presents a specific pose, so the readers recognize a cruel villain, a caring father, or a shrewd con man (Van Gemert, 2012b, 2015a).

The pose should contain a clear message. Presenting a pose seems like playing a role. Goffman (1959) offers an analysis of interaction in everyday life by referring to dramaturgic concepts. In a specific situation a person uses specific behavior. He plays a role, because he wants others to make sense of his behaviour and he expects them to react in a certain way. Thus interaction becomes meaningful. Apart from cultural differences, roles are recognized because in society they are frequently recurring. We understand what a policeman, a teacher, or a father does, because we are familiar with these roles, complex as they may be and apart from who plays them.

Sometimes the picture is unclear, and to make it easier to recognize scripts can be used as templates. Robin Hood, who stole from the rich to give to the poor, is a good example. The monster offers another script. Someone did such cruel and gruesome things that he cannot be seen as human. Five biographies that have “monster” in their title are by Hall (2008), Horion (1981), Shakur (1993), Stickney (1996), and Wuornos and Berry-Dee (2006). Of course, a template may help the reader, but does it represent the protagonist?

Taking on a pose, like playing a role, means sending a message to the other. Via interaction, people practise “impression management” (Goffman, 1959). Symbolic interactionists say the individual, the self, sees who he/she is through the other (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934). This “looking-glass self” (Cooley, 1964) is created through reflexive relations between the individual and his/her social world. Background variables linked to a historical-sociological frame may point to class, family, or neighbourhood but it is the foreground where the protagonist presents himself/herself and where he/she is seen by the other.

Now, who decides on the pose? In a biography, it can be the author who makes this choice, or is it the criminal who takes on a pose on his own? Obviously, in autobiographies, it is the protagonist himself/herself who decides and in unauthorized biographies it is the author. In authorized biographies, the protagonist and the biographer work together in putting the life history on paper. Unlike an unauthorized biography, this is not so much a story *about* the main character, as it is a story *by* him. *His* story.

Following this approach, the following paragraphs offer a description and an analysis of the last offense by Jan Hoolwerf, the attempted murder as mentioned in the Introduction. The violent act was premeditated and rational, since he clearly planned it. Nevertheless, what he did is hard to understand, if not impossible, from an outside perspective. Two questions work as guidelines: How does the protagonist see himself? How does he want to be seen?

His act was not a secret; he wanted to be noticed. Thus, the foreground can reveal how he wants to be seen as he takes on a violent pose. Through the background of his life history, we learn why this is important and what this means to him.

#### 5 Methods and Data

After the first contact, Jan and I soon decided to start working on the biography but we hardly knew each other. That certainly is a meagre basis for a serious endeavour with intense communication. I wrote a summary on paper of the tasks and things to come, in order to make clear what I thought we were going to do. I offered it to Jan, hoping to avoid unwelcome surprises. I was explicit about the long interviews that I anticipated and mentioned that they were going to be recorded and transcribed. I stressed that this would take several months, and it would be my task to start writing afterwards. If books were sold, we would split the revenues evenly. Jan read what I had written and agreed to it instantly. We could start.

In collaborating with Jan, a combination of methods resulted in a variety of data. Most important were the interviews with Jan himself. Besides Jan, I also interviewed his ex-wife, a befriended couple, his lawyer, a mentor of a rehabilitation programme, and a coordinator of a volunteer programme. A second source consisted of various documents, ranging from criminal records and psychological reports to newspaper clippings and a membership card of a football club. I would either get these documents directly from Jan or from his lawyer who supplied me with two large dossiers of attempted murder cases. I was also allowed to read and analyze 46 letters that Jan had written to the couple while he was incarcerated in America. Furthermore, I could observe Jan and I made a habit of writing field notes on all the occasions that I met him. Often these were just additions to the interview at hand, but towards the end of our collaboration, we spent more and more time together being away from the setting with the voice recorder.

The first of a series of 25 interviews took place in January 2010. We developed a routine for the Friday morning: at 10 am I would arrive at his apartment in the city of Utrecht, and we talked until we stopped at around 12 am. Jan has a good memory and talking about his life is easy for him. In the interviews with Jan, I used chronology as a self-evident tool to work systematically. This may seem an order that is imposed on the protagonist from the outside, but at the same time it is a very logical one that is easy to understand. In our first contact, Jan talked about his time in US prisons, and I had assured him that we would address this and all other issues in due course. I did not want to get lost in separate stories before getting the big picture. So, in the first two interviews, we broadly went through his life in general to create a visual overview. Using some pages that I taped together a very long horizontal axis was created with the years of his life, starting in 1956. On the vertical axis, we put thematic categories – such as home, family, school, work, drugs, crime, prison, and religion – that would turn up in Jan's life history. During these first two interviews, I would use a pencil to write on the pages. Later, when we felt the big picture was more or less complete, I put all the data onto an Excel spreadsheet. During the interviews, we had a print-out right in front of us and every now and then I could look up "where we happened to be" in the overview. Sometimes we stumbled across an inconsistency, and I would adjust the file. This sheet can be compared to a life history calendar that is used by life course criminologists. Jan agreed to this, and he could see and understand why it was done.

Generally, a respondent is interviewed once and rapport has to be built on this one occasion. In 25 interviews there is a similar process but obviously, this goes on much longer and the cooperation can become much more intense. I wouldn't say Jan and I became friends but our relationship was very constructive. I could ask all I wanted and Jan would take the time to reply. In the beginning, creating the big picture, we remained on the surface, but later we also spoke about personal as well as emotional elements. The conversation could get sad or gloomy but Jan would not avoid issues we touched upon, and he answered to the best of his ability. He is the most cooperative respondent I ever met in my 30-year career as a qualitative researcher.

For half a year, we met nearly every Friday morning. Not only would I interview him, but I could also hear and see what was going on in his life from day to day. I could hear Jan complain about telephone bills, and he would talk about his visits to friends or his attempts to start running on a regular basis. When we reached saturation point in the interviews, we decided to go to the cities where he had lived. I would pick him up in my car, or we agreed to meet somewhere, and afterwards we walked through particular streets of Haarlem, Amsterdam, Utrecht, Baarn, and Nijmegen. I had heard about these places but now Jan would describe again what had happened there, and the stories came to life. Not only had I heard him talking about what was behind him but I could also see and to some extent experience the life he was living now and what kind of a man he had become. Interviews turned into participant observation and biography into ethnography (Van Gemert, 2012a).

The combination of interviews, observations, and written material allowed me to triangulate, and if certain things were still unclear, I could call Jan and listen to his opinion or ask for some extra information. The data in this research are extremely rich, and because of trust and transparent collaboration, the validity is very high. The books on Stanley (Shaw, 1930) and on Sam Goodman (Steffensmeier & Ulmer, 2005) are among the very few academic authorized biographies that have such rich and varied data and they can, in this sense, be compared to this study on Jan Hoolwerf.

Shortly after we put an end to gathering data, Jan committed the attempted murder. Since his arrest, I have stayed in contact with him. I have visited him in prison in Utrecht, and I was present when his case came to court. Afterwards, I met him several times in Veenhuizen while he was in prison, and I continued to visit him when he was entrusted to a mental hospital in Eindhoven. I wrote dozens of letters to him but he didn't answer often, because he did not have enough money for stamps. Incidentally, we still have contact over the telephone.

For writing this text, I used the interviews and research notes but the attempted murder was committed after these data were gathered. Jan and I talked about this last offence a number of times when he was incarcerated. I made notes of these conversations afterwards, as I was not allowed to record them. Apart from that, in letters

I have asked him specific questions about this offence. He took the time to write two long letters to me in response. After receiving the first one, I wrote to him again and elaborated on what I wanted him to explain to me because I was interested in what he thought and felt *while committing the offence*, I stressed what I hoped he would do for me. “Very important: I am not asking how you look back on this now but rather what you thought and felt at that time. That difference is very important. What emotions did you have then? Ask yourself .... How did you feel? Were you angry, uneasy, confused, .... Or did you feel nothing?” Before presenting what he answered, his life history will be described first of all.

## 6 Life History of Jan Hoolwerf

Jan Hoolwerf was born in 1956, in the city of Haarlem. He is the eldest of four and from the beginning, his father, a professional marine, was keen that this son would follow in his footsteps and pursue a military career. As a parent, the man was very strict and the stories Jan tells about harsh punishments in these early years are full of domestic violence. The marriage was not stable, and Jan’s parents divorced. The two youngest children stayed with their mother but Jan and his brother were sent to an orphanage. Jan has bad memories of those times. He felt lonely, and looking back he cannot remember he and his brother ever being visited. Jan was unhappy and on reaching puberty he became rebellious and refused to accept the frequent beatings he received in the orphanage. When he started hitting back, the authorities decided to send him to a foster home. In this new environment, Jan again resisted authority. Subsequently, he was hired to work on a boat that sailed the River Rhine. In an argument with the captain, Jan attacked a much bigger man with a knife. Immediately the boat was stopped and Jan was set ashore in Germany.

At the age of 16, Jan was left alone, homeless and off the radar for all Dutch institutions. In the summer of 1972, after smoking pot and camping for free in the Amsterdam Vondelpark, he was noticed by a few youngsters, who introduced him to a new world of crime. Jan learned about stealing, street robbery, and extortion. The boy that was once a victim of violence grew into a man, 2 metres tall, who used violence instrumentally.

Jan went on experimenting with hard drugs as he entered the Amsterdam drug scene. Local underworld figures paid him for protection or to intimidate others. This lifestyle of violence and drugs inevitably brought him into contact with the police and justice. Over the years, Jan served a number of short sentences but he coped easily with the prison situation.

In 1981, at the age of 25, Jan got married and left Amsterdam. The young couple moved to Haarlem and Jan got a steady job in a factory. A son was born but their family life was doomed to failure because Jan followed in the footsteps of his father. He insisted that he never beat his wife, but nevertheless his extreme egocentric and dominant attitude resulted in a divorce. Jan’s reaction was violent and dramatic as he shot himself in the stomach. After a short stay in a mental hospital, he returned to a life of drugs and crime.

A change presented itself in 1998. On his son’s 16th birthday, he phoned his ex-wife. At first, she was shocked to hear from him again, but she was very unhappy and physically worn out in her current marriage and hoped Jan could help change her situation. The family was reunited, and Jan stopped using drugs and managed to find a job as a gardener.

Jan felt important as a caring husband, and his ex-wife became well again. In his new job, he worked hard and received compliments from satisfied customers. His son, however, was being confronted with the very masculine, dominant father he had never known and confrontations were inevitable. The mother sided with her son, and Jan was told to leave again. At the same time, his relationship with his boss turned sour, and he was fired. Only a few years after the reunion with his family, he was back to where he was. Almost simultaneously he was rejected in two situations and again Jan reacted with dramatic violence. He threatened his wife with a knife and in the same violent outburst, he turned on his boss with an axe. The man was unharmed but later Jan ran into the man’s son and stabbed him.

He was sentenced for attempted murder and sent to prison for two years. He calmed down in prison, but within half a year of being released in 2004, with no income and no home, he was back to a life of crime. He accepted an offer to transport drugs but was caught going through customs in New York City with 5 kilos of cocaine and sentenced to four years’ prison in the United States.

Jan was used to being in prison but the situation in the US was different from what he knew in the Netherlands. In federal prison, he at first decided not to be a part of the gangs, but after one particular incident, he thought being a member could make his life easier. Now in his fifties, Jan joined the Sureños, a Latino prison gang. Even though his fellow Sureños were Mexican and Catholic, while Jan was white, Muslim, twice as old, and



much bigger than most of them, he was soon considered a member. His overall prison experience had been noted but the key to his acceptance was his ability to use violence. After his initiation of being beaten up for 13 seconds, he was assigned to several missions where he had to stab enemy gang members. Jan carried out these tasks without a single complaint, and furthermore, he was very brave and again violent during a raid in the prison yard, where the Sureños were outnumbered but attacked a rival gang. In the US prisons, Jan experienced a period where his deeds were valued and he was appreciated by his fellow gang members.

In September 2008, Jan was set free again and put on a flight to the Netherlands. He found himself in the same situation four years earlier but now he was determined to make a serious attempt to try and change his life. With the help of Dutch probation, he managed to rent an apartment and he started working as a volunteer. He helped out in a home for elderly people and he gave lectures for a foundation to young people in schools, clubs, and community centers throughout the country. Every Friday, he visited the nearby mosque. Later, he decided to work with me on his biography.

In spring 2010, Jan met a divorced woman. The two became friends but when the romance was about to take off, Jan stopped. At her birthday party, her children had a surprise. While she sat and enjoyed the feast with Jan at her side, suddenly a handsome man walked into the room and started to strip right in front of her. Jan was very uncomfortable with this. He sat and waited for it to end, as he didn't want to ruin the party, but that same day he ended the relationship. If he was to be her man, how could they put him in this situation? The woman and her son tried to reconcile the relationship but Jan would not relent.

After a while, things turned sour. Jan had very little income, and he had a hard time making ends meet. Since April 2010, Jan had owned a dog, and he was very fond of the animal. They took long walks, and Jan made sure the dog was well fed, but this meant very little money was left and after a while, Jan himself started losing weight. He talked about phone calls he had to make and how he got standard answers that fed his contempt for bureaucratic organizations. The reimbursements of his travel expenses when he gave lectures were insufficient and the foundation received complaints because people felt Jan was too positive about his time in the prison gang. After some discussion with the coordinator of the foundation, Jan was no longer asked to give lectures. Around the same time, Jan interfered with certain policies in the home for the elderly because he felt some patients were not treated appropriately. As conflict arose, he was told not to come anymore.

This is where the interviews and observations for writing the biography stop.

## 7 Analysing Attempted Murder

Looking at the life history of a person, one is inclined to stress background factors. Indeed, when learning about Jan's youth, the dominant father and domestic violence are the first steps into a world of violence and represent a prediction of the role that Jan would take on himself when he was older. His socialization developed in the orphanage where he learned to refuse to be disciplined and literally started to fight authority. When he was homeless and entered the drug scene and the underworld of Amsterdam, violence became an instrument that he handled almost without restraint. In short, the insecure attachment in his upbringing, his poor lower-class position, and the underworld connections are all good predictors of a criminal career that have been verified over and over again in criminological research.

In Jan's biography, four poses are discussed. "Violence" is the pose he takes on when he wants to be seen as someone others should not try to stop. In other situations, he wants to be seen as "caring" because he can work very hard doing something for the other. He believes he deserves recognition for that. "Mutiny" is the third pose of opposition to the systems in society by a man who wants to show his autonomy. In the fourth pose of "dramatic violence", Jan uses violence as a last resort. He intentionally draws attention to a violent act in order to turn things around. He shot himself, threatened his boss with an axe, and stabbed the man's son, and all were attempts to change the situation he was in, and to reclaim his manhood.

The last attempted murder again bears the pose of dramatic violence. This becomes clear when we unravel what happened leading up to and during this last violent act. When Jan returned from the US, he rented an apartment in Utrecht. This seemed like a good beginning but the house felt empty. He was used to being surrounded by fellow inmates but now he was alone, back in the situation where he failed before. "What is a house with nothing in it, without people? I have met many people but I won't let them get close. I cannot let them know I care about them or maybe even love them. Just imagine, loving people, that means you are just one step away from hurting them."

The short relationship with the woman that he met in spring 2010 came to an end. At about the same time, he lost both volunteer jobs. This was hard to accept because he was trying to care for others. He felt hurt and

rejected, and that was a sharp contrast to the acceptance and respect he felt as a gang member. “I didn’t care anymore. I longed for my homies in prison in America.” He knew life in the gang was not about love or even sympathy but he understood prison life and his role was valued by others. “The gang was my only family.”

Increasingly Jan was getting frustrated and depressed. He was contemplating doing something that would get him sent back to prison. In the last interviews, he hinted at this: “One way or another, I function better in prison. [...] Normal life doesn’t please me one bit. All I have is shit. [...] When we have finished the book, and I don’t have to pay attention to that anymore, then I’ll see if I can get back to prison.” Later he writes: “I am going back to prison. I cope better with crooks and the structure inside.”

His mind was riven with confusion about what he was about to do. He knew that there were still a few people who supported him and cared for him, especially the befriended couple that stayed in touch with him while he was incarcerated in the US. There was a sharp contrast between the sympathy he felt and the crime he was anticipating. He dealt with this controversy by making himself disappear from this social setting. “There is only one solution: taking myself out. But in Sureño style. A victim is easy to find, he is unimportant in this play, he simply is the means to an end.”

Jan was not really angry at the victim. The man was a necessary attribute for Jan’s goal of getting back to prison. When Jan told him about the Sureños during a previous contact, the man used a tone of contempt Jan did not like. At the time, he did not react, but when he was creating his plan, it came back to him. Jan chose this man because of this remark and because his esteem for this drug user was very low. “He lies in his bed all day, doing nothing. That fat pig.” When describing what he did that evening when he went over to the man’s house, he used degrading words: “boy scout”, “idiot”, “sucker”, “dog”, “dirty, filthy, cowardly dog”, “pig”, and “bitch”.

After he had stabbed the man, Jan left the house and walked over to the nearby police station to turn himself in. As he was doing so, police cars raced by with loud sirens. He found the police station deserted, so Jan decided to sit down on a nearby bench and wait. “I put down my bag and lit a joint. I relaxed and thought, ‘Now you are really in deep shit’. Not a satisfying feeling but a relaxed one. I had not felt like that for a very long time.”

## 8 Encounter with a Criminal Mind

The actor, Jan, found himself in a situation where he became increasingly frustrated and depressed. With no volunteer work, very little income, and few meaningful relationships with other people, he lost grip on his life. He tried but it seems he was not able to function as a regular citizen in society. At this stage, he saw himself as a failure but he wanted to be seen as an autonomous man who cared for others and made his own decisions in life. The legitimate routes he tried in normal life were not successful but he knew that in prison he was respected and for him, life inside was much easier.

How could he once more become an autonomous man? Through his last violent act, he put himself in a position where he was in charge again. The attempted murder was committed by stabbing someone with a knife, Sureño style, just like what he was used to doing in the US prisons. He knew this would get him back in prison and in his view, this was the best place for him. With the pose of dramatic violence of this final act, he erased the picture of failure. Others may disapprove but this was his choice.

Stabbing someone because of a minor altercation and then turning yourself in, knowing that you will be convicted of a serious crime, doesn’t seem to make sense. One needs to know Jan and the life he lived to understand why and how he did this. Authorized biographies, like the ones on Jan Hoolwerf (Van Gemert, 2011) and Said Bensellam (Van Gemert, 2015b), present criminological encounters with obvious relevance for the discipline as they provide an excellent opportunity to study what goes on inside the criminal mind, during criminal careers and while committing criminal acts. One obvious reason for this is the amount and the quality of data that is gathered on the single person; another is the opportunity to combine perspectives. While it is common to use an approach with an emphasis on structure and stress background factors, an interaction perspective is added to include what happens in the foreground.

## References

- Abbott, H.J. (1981). *In the belly of the beast*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Anderson, N. (1923). *The hobo: The sociology of the homeless man*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Arlacchi, P. (1993). *Leven in de mafia: Het verhaal van Antonio Calderone*. Amsterdam: Nijgh & Van Ditmar.
- Arvedlund, E. (2010). *Too good to be true. The rise and fall of Bernie Madoff*. London: Penguin Books.

- Blokland, A., & van der Geest, V. (Eds.). (2007). *International handbook of criminal careers and life-course criminology*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Blumer, H. (1969). *Symbolic interactionism: Perspective and method*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Bovenkerk, F. (1995). *La bella Bettien*. Amsterdam: Pandora.
- Bowlby, J. (1951). *Maternal care and mental health*. Geneva: World Health Organization.
- Boyle, J. (1977). *A sense of freedom*. London: Pan Books.
- Chessman, C. (1954). *Cell 2455 Death Row*. New York: Prentice-Hall.
- Coninck, D. (2004). *Marc Dutroux: Het stilste jongetje van de klas*. Antwerpen: Houtekiet.
- Cooley, C. H. (1964). *Human nature and the social order*. New York: Schocken.
- Copes, H., & Hochstedler, A. (2010). Interviewing the incarcerated: Pitfalls and promises. In W. Bernasco (Ed.), *Offenders on offending: Learning about crime from criminals* (pp. 49–67). Cullompton: Willan.
- Denzin, N. K. (1989). *Interpretive biography*. Newbury Park: Sage.
- Farrington, D. (2003). Developmental and life-course criminology: Key theoretical and empirical issues. *Criminology*, 42(2), 221–225.
- Ferrell, J. (2009). Kill method: A provocation. *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Criminology*, 1(1), 1–22.
- Fragoso, M. (2011). *Tiger, tiger*. London: Penguin.
- Gemert, F. van (2011) *Van prison gang tot tbs: Biografie van een gewelddadig man*. Meppel: Just Publishers.
- Gemert, F. van (2012a) Biografie wordt Etnografie: Hoe interviews over het levensverhaal van een boef uitdraiden op participerende observatie. *Kwalon 51*, 17(3), 34–40.
- Gemert, F. van (2012b) De Pose: Boevenbiografie tussen structuur en interactie. *Tijdschrift over Cultuur en Criminaliteit*, 2(3), 17–32.
- Gemert, F. van (2013) Boef zoekt boek: Lessen uit afwijzing. In S. Ruiter, W. Bernasco, W. Huisman, & G.J.N. Bruinsma (Eds.), *Eenvoud en verscheidenheid: Liber amicorum voor Henk Elffers* (pp. 441–55). Amsterdam: NSCR & Vrije Universiteit.
- Gemert, F. van (2015a) Life History and Biographies in Criminology. In H. Copes & M. Miller (Eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Qualitative Criminology* (pp. 72–87). Oxford: Routledge.
- Gemert, F. van (2015b) *Straatkrediet: Biografie van Said Bensellam*. Meppel: JustPublishers.
- Gemert, F. van (2016) Biografie en Levensverhaal. In T. Decorte & D. Zaitch (Eds.), *Kwalitatieve methoden en technieken in de criminologie* (pp. 349–378). Leuven: Acco.
- Gemert, F. van (Forthcoming) To see the fear in their eyes: Biography in life course criminology. In A. Blokland & V. van der Geest (Eds.), *The International Handbook of Life-Course Criminology*. Oxford: Routledge.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. London: Allen Unwin.
- Hall, A. (2008). *Monster*. Amsterdam: Bert Bakker.
- Hollway, W., & Jefferson, T. (2000). *Doing qualitative research differently: Free association, narrative and the interview method*. London: Sage.
- Horion, F. (1981). *Monster zonder waarde? Het levensverhaal van een zesvoudige moordenaar*. Antwerpen: Lotus.
- Hüsken, M. (2001). *Charles Z.: Ex-autocoureur en hasjbaron*. Amsterdam: Meulenhoff.
- Hüsken, M. (2007). *De criminele carrière van Mink K.* Amsterdam: Meulenhoff.
- Kampusch, N. (2010). *De diefstal van mijn jeugd*. Amsterdam: Arena.
- Katz, J. (1988). *Seductions of crime: Moral and sensual attractions of doing evil*. New York: Basic Books.
- Klockars, C. B. (1974). *The professional fence*. New York: Free Press.
- Kok, A. (2011). *Holleerder: De jonge jaren*. Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij.
- Korterink, H. J. (2008). *De Godmother in Panama: Thea Moeaar achter de tralies*. Amsterdam: Nieuw Amsterdam.
- Kray, C. (1988). *Me and my brothers*. London: HarperCollins.
- Kray, K. (2000). *The twins: Free at last*. London: John Blake.
- Kray, R. (1990). *Born fighter*. London: Century.
- Kray, R. (2000). *A way of life: Over thirty years of blood, sweat and tears*. London: Sidgwick and Jackson.
- Kray, R., & Kray, R. (1988). *Our story*. London: Sidgwick and Jackson.
- Kray, R. (1993). *My story*. London: Sidgwick and Jackson.
- Laub, J. H., & Sampson, R. J. (2003). *Shared beginnings, divergent lives: Delinquent boys to age 70*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- LeBor, A. (2009). *Madoff; Miljardenfraude van een meesteroplichter*. Rotterdam: BBNC uitgevers.
- Leeson, N. (1996). *De bom onder de Barings bank*. Utrecht: Bruna Uitgevers.
- Leurs, R. H. (2006). *Onbegrijpelijk kwaad: Marc Dutroux als 'ster van het kwaad' en als sublieme media-ervaring*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

- Lieshout, T. van (2012). *Mijn meneer*. Amsterdam: Querido.
- Maas, P. (1999). *Underboss: Sammy the Bull Gravano's story of life in the Mafia*. New York: Harper Collins.
- McVicar, J. (1974). *McVicar by himself*. London: Pan Books
- Maruna, S. (2001). *Making good: How ex-convicts reform and rebuild their lives*. Washington DC: American Psychological Association.
- Maruna, S., & Matravers, A. (2007) N=1: Criminology and the person. *Theoretical Criminology*, 11(4), 427–442.
- Masters, B. (1985). *Killing for company: The case of Dennis Nilsen*. London: Jonathan Cape.
- Mead, G. H. (1934). *Mind, self, and society: From the standpoint of a social behaviorist*. London: University of Chicago Press.
- Merton, R. K. (1957). *Social theory and social structure*. New York: Free Press.
- Middelburg, B. (1992). *De Dominee: Opkomst en ondergang van maffiabaas Klaas Bruinsma*. Amsterdam: L. J. Veen.
- Mills, C. W. (1959). *The sociological imagination*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Norris, J. (1991). *Henry Lee Lucas*. New York: Zebra.
- Peeters, H. (2002). *Gerrit de Stotteraar; Biografie van een boef*. Amsterdam: Podium.
- Presser, L. (2008). *Been a heavy life: Stories of violent men*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Presser, L., & Sandberg, S. (Eds.). (2015). *Narrative criminology: Understanding stories of crime*. New York: New York University Press.
- Probyn, W. (1977). *Angel Face: The making of a criminal*. Scoresby: Allen & Unwin.
- Read, M. B. (1991). *Chopper from the inside*. Smithfield: Sly Ink.
- Rodriguez, L. J. (1993). *Always running: La vida loca, gang days in L. A.* Willimantic: Curbstone Press
- Rule, A. (1980). *The stranger beside me*. New York: Signet.
- Rule, A. (1983). *Lust killer*. New York: Signet.
- Shakur, S. (1993). *Monster: The autobiography of an L. A. gang member*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press.
- Shanahan, M. J., & Macmillan, R. (2008). *Biography and the sociological imagination: Contexts and contingencies*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Shaw, C. (1930). *The Jack-roller*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Shaw, C. R., & McKay, H. D. (1931). *Social factors in juvenile delinquency: Report of the causes of crime*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office.
- Shover, N. (2010). Life histories and autobiographies as ethnographic data. In D. Gadd, S. Karstedt, & S. Messner (Eds.), *Sage handbook of criminological research methods* (pp. 11–22). Newbury Park: Sage.
- Simpson, C., & Pearlman, A. (2005). *Inside the crips*. New York: St Martin's Griffin.
- Smith, N. 'Razor' (2004). *A few kind words and a loaded gun*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Steffensmeier, D., & Ulmer, J. (2005). *Confessions of a dying thief: Understanding criminal Careers and illegal enterprise*. New Brunswick: Aldine Transaction.
- Stickney, B. M. (1996). *All-American monster: The unauthorized biography of Timothy McVeigh*. Amherst: Prometheus Books.
- Sullivan, P., & Maiken, P. T. (1984). *Killer clown: The John Wayne Gacy murders*. New York: Pinnacle.
- Sutherland, E. (1937). *The professional thief*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Taylor, L. (1984). *In the underworld*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Vitale, G., & Costanzo, C. (2009). *Ik was een van hen*. Amsterdam: Mouria.
- Wuornos, A. C., & Berry-Dee, C. (2006). *Monster: My true story*. London: John Blake Publishing Ltd.
- Zee, S. van der (2006). *Anatomie van een seriemoordenaar*. Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij.

**Frank van Gemert** PhD (1958) is assistant professor at the criminology department of VU University in Amsterdam. He was a student in cultural anthropology at the University of Amsterdam. Over the years Frank has conducted qualitative research on various criminological themes such as drug dealing, murder, squatting and gangs. His dissertation (1998) has the subtitle 'Chances, Culture and Crime of Moroccan Boys'. In 2011 and 2015 he has written two criminological biographies. Frank has an interest in cultural criminology and narrative criminology and currently he is involved in research on kickboxing.

How to cite this article (APA): Van Gemert, F. (2018). Stabbing to get to prison: Biography as an encounter with the criminal mind. *Criminological Encounters*, 1(1), 57-68. doi:10.26395/CE18010106



© The author(s), 2018 | Licensed under Creative Commons CC BY-NC-ND 4.0.